



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States

Monthly Message for the Monastic and Consecrated Servants

October 2018

My beloved children,

When I consider the very first monks — the foundation of our monastic path — they did not have the sayings of the fathers or monastic books and letters to read for knowledge and spiritual edification, yet they were filled with the Holy Spirit and served God and their brethren with great love and self-denial. These were true disciples of our Lord Jesus Christ — “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:34-35). The Holy Bible was their book, the commandments were their rules, and the living example of our Lord Jesus Christ was their guide. Nowadays, it is quite a different story.

It seems to me that now our clothes define us more than our hearts. We may read and meditate on the Holy Bible, read many books, attend all mandatory praises and prayers and serve in them — we may even be the ones officiating the sacraments! Yet, our Lord Jesus Christ can say to us as He did to the scribes and Pharisees, “Well did Isaiah prophesy about you, saying: ‘These people draw near to Me with their mouth, and honor Me with their lips, but their heart is far from Me. And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men’” (Matt. 15:7-9). It seems to me that self-denial is not as it used to be but that we are often consumed with our own happiness and cling to our pride, which poisons our faith and destroys our spiritual struggle. Is this why we left all to follow the One? So we can argue and completely disregard the commandments and our chosen path?

“Prayer is the flower of gentleness and of freedom from anger.”¹ If ever we find ourselves straying away from the path — behaving in whatever ways are unfitting to our calling — know that we have ceased to live the main purpose of our lives, which is true prayer. We have most likely become concerned with matters that are of secondary importance or of no importance at all, and have ceased truly praying. True prayer is not just outwardly, as we mentioned above, but it is prayer from a pure heart, which denies itself and follows the commandments. Otherwise, we cannot claim that we truly pray.

My beloved, our Creator was incarnate and became man to teach us how He would like for us to live. He did not come simply as a preacher with beautiful words, but He himself was a living example of every word spoken. He did all this for us, His lowly children, so

¹ *The Philokalia*. Evagrius the Solitary. On Prayer. The One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts. In N. T. Hagiorite, M. O. Corinth, G. Palmer, P. Sherrard, & K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 58

that we may imitate His pure example and be united with Him at the end of the journey — “Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.” (Matt. 25:34-36). If this sounds like an elementary Sunday school lesson, then why are we not doing what He asked us to do? Have we fed our brothers and sisters who hunger for love or have we deemed them worthy of starvation? Have we given to drink those who thirst for spiritual words or do we argue about trifling matters? Have we embraced and accepted those who we have made strangers to us or do we only remain in our comfort zone? Have we covered the sins of others or do we expose them? Have we served, looked out and prayed for one another when one of us falls or do we leave each other in our spiritual illnesses? Have we been a source of comfort to those imprisoned in struggles or have we been the prison guards making sure they remain locked in?

You can have the most responsibilities in the monastery/convent and, to onlookers, appear to be a very important person, but I tell you do not be satisfied with this for “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” (1 Cor. 13: 1-3).

My beloved, we are called “Father” and “Mother” yet, in a sense, these titles came without having earned them. A woman can have a biological child and abandoned it or abuse the child — in this case, could she truly be called “Mother”? A spiritual father or mother is a caregiver to everyone. They wash the feet of their beloveds. Not only the ones who are “good” but especially the ones who are “bad” because to a father or mother there are no underserving children. We would judge poorly a mother who gossips about her children and feels hatred towards them when if they disrespect her or broke her rules. Maybe we would consider such a mother as controlling and unloving. Haven’t we all seen mothers chasing after their children in church, hoping their children can just be obedient and remain still just for a moment? Have you ever seen a mother carry her child outside, come back into church and lock the door behind her, telling herself, “I need to distance myself for the sake of peace”? We would all be shocked indeed, but I tell you that we often do this very thing to one another...

I am so thankful that our Lord Jesus Christ does not judge us the way we judge each other. I am so thankful He gives us everything good, although we deserve nothing good at all. I am so thankful that He gave us His life... and I could only pray to be worthy to imitate Him do the same for others.

May the peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.
Glory be to God forever. Amen.